



July 21, 2017

VIA FOIAONLINE.REGULATIONS.GOV
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Headquarters

Re: Freedom of Information Act Request: Communications of EPA Intergovernmental Relations Staff

Dear FOIA Officer:

This is a request under the Freedom of Information Act, 5 U.S.C. § 552, as amended (“FOIA”), from Sierra Club, a nonprofit organization whose purpose is to explore, enjoy and protect the wild places of the earth; to practice and promote the responsible use of the earth’s ecosystems and resources; and to educate and enlist humanity to protect and restore the quality of the natural and human environments.

REQUESTED RECORDS¹

Sierra Club requests Records of the following type in the possession, custody, or control of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (“EPA”) for the period January 20, 2017 through the date of this request:²

¹ “Records” means information of any kind, including writings (handwritten, typed, electronic or otherwise produced, reproduced or stored), letters, memoranda, correspondence, notes, applications, completed forms, studies, reports, reviews, guidance documents, policies, telephone conversations, telefaxes, emails, documents, databases, drawings, graphs, charts, photographs, minutes of meetings, electronic and magnetic recordings of meetings, and any other compilation of data from which information can be obtained. Without limitation, the records requested include records relating to the topics described below at any stage of development, whether proposed, draft, pending, interim, final or otherwise. All of the foregoing are included in this request if they are in the possession of or otherwise under the control of EPA, National Headquarters and all of its Offices, Regions and other subdivisions.

² The time period for a records search can begin on the first-employed staff person’s date of hire, but as the dates on which these individuals joined the EPA are not public, we are unable to specify a narrower time frame.

1. All emails, text messages, faxes, voice mails, and other form of communications between any of the following personnel and any person outside of EPA:³
 - a. Troy Lyons
 - b. Elizabeth Bennett
 - c. Christian Palich
 - d. Layne Bangerter
 - e. Aaron Ringel
 - f. Kaitlyn Shimmin
 - g. Kenneth Wagner
2. Any phone logs or other indices which memorialize communications between any of the EPA personnel listed in (1) above and any person outside of EPA.
3. All calendars, whether electronic or in paper format, of each of the EPA personnel listed in (1) above for the above-listed time period.
4. All sign-in sheets or other records memorializing attendance at any meetings during the above-listed time period with the EPA personnel listed in (1) above at which a person outside of EPA was in attendance.
5. All emails, faxes, voicemails, texts or other forms of communication that have been deleted which fit the above specifications and which remain recoverable in any way. If fulfilling this specification requires additional time, we ask that production of documents meeting specifications 1-4 be given priority and processed separately from any potential responsive records to this specification.

For purposes of this request, the term “person outside of EPA” means any person who is **not** an employee within the EPA, subject to the following exclusions: We are **not** seeking communications to or from persons employed elsewhere within the Executive Branch of the United States, or persons who have an executed legal contract to provide consulting or other services to EPA. You may also specifically exclude from processing and release any records that are publicly available (e.g., through regulations.gov). **In contrast to other recent requests from Sierra Club for EPA employee’s communications, we are including communications with state agencies (and other state officials) in the scope of this request.**

This request includes communication related to EPA that is or was on any system or device, computer, phone, smartphone, tablet, email account, cloud, server or other communication

³ All individuals listed are in EPA’s Office of Congressional and Intergovernmental Relations except for Kenneth Wagner, who is in the Office of the Administrator.

system either **personal or business** that is or was owned **or** operated by the EPA personnel listed in (1) above or otherwise established for the purposes of communicating with those personnel.

This request includes all emails or other communications from any **personal** account operated by the EPA personnel listed in (1) above which have been forwarded into an EPA government email account.

This request applies to all email accounts assigned to or operated by the EPA personnel listed in (1) above, whether on an official EPA email address or server or not, that relate to official business of EPA. This request applies to so-called “alias” email accounts that may or may not include the names the EPA personnel listed in (1) above in the email address.

EXEMPT RECORDS

If you determine that portions of the records requested are exempt from disclosure, we request that you segregate the exempt portions and deliver the non-exempt portions of such records to my attention at the address below within the statutory time limit. 5 U.S.C. § 552(b).

If EPA denies all or part of this request, please cite the specific exemptions you believe justify your refusal to release the information and notify us of your appeal procedures available under the law.

FORMAT OF REQUESTED RECORDS

Under FOIA, you are obligated to provide records in a readily-accessible electronic format and in the format requested. *See, e.g.*, 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(3)(B) (“In making any record available to a person under this paragraph, an agency shall provide the record in any form or format requested by the person if the record is readily reproducible by the agency in that form or format.”).

Please provide all records in an electronic .pdf format that is text-searchable and OCR-formatted. Portfolios and embedded files within files are not readily-accessible. Please do not provide the records in a single, or “batched,” .pdf file. Please segregate documents either by employee or by request categories (1)-(5) above.

RECORD DELIVERY

We appreciate a prompt determination on the requested records. As mandated in FOIA, we anticipate a reply within 20 working days. 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(6)(A)(i). Please email copies of the requested records to the e-mail address below. Please deliver documents that are not available

in an electronic format to the physical address below. Failure to comply within the statutory timeframe may result in Sierra Club filing an action before the relevant U.S. District Court to ensure timely receipt of the requested materials.

Deliver electronic documents to:

Elena Saxonhouse
elena.saxonhouse@sierraclub.org

Deliver other documents to:

Elena Saxonhouse
Sierra Club - Environmental Law Program
2101 Webster Street, Suite 1300
Oakland, CA 94612

Please send documents on a rolling basis. EPA's search for—or deliberations concerning—certain records should not delay the production of others that EPA has already retrieved and elected to produce. *See generally* 40 C.F.R. § 2.104 (describing response deadlines).

FEE WAIVER REQUEST

I respectfully request that you waive all fees in connection with this request as provided by 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii) and 40 C.F.R. § 2.107(l). Sierra Club is the nation's oldest grassroots organization with more than 2.9 million members and supporters nationwide. Sierra Club is a leading non-governmental organization seeking to educate and mobilize the public on issues of environmental protection including climate change, fossil fuel energy, clean energy and clean water. Sierra Club has spent years promoting the public interest through the development of policies that protect human health and the environment, and has routinely received fee waivers under FOIA.⁴

FOIA was designed to provide citizens a broad right to access government records. FOIA's basic purpose is to "open agency action to the light of public scrutiny," with a focus on the public's "right to be informed about what their government is up to." *U.S. Dep't of Justice v. Reporters Comm. For Freedom of Press*, 489 U.S. 749, 773-74 (1989) (internal quotation and citations omitted). In order to provide public access to this information, FOIA's fee waiver provision requires that "[d]ocuments shall be furnished without any charge or at a [reduced] charge," if the request satisfies the standard. 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii). The 1986 fee waiver amendments were designed specifically to provide non-profit organizations such as Sierra Club access to government records without the payment of fees. *Ettlinger v. FBI*, 596 F. Supp. 867, 872 (D.

⁴ For a recent example, see FOIA Request Reference No. EPA-HQ-2017-8568 (fee letter waiver received June 28, 2017).

Mass. 1984) (fee waiver provision intended “to prevent government agencies from using high fees to discourage certain types of requesters and requests,” which are “consistently associated with requests from journalists, scholars, and non-profit public interest groups.”).

As explained below, this FOIA request satisfies the factors listed in EPA’s governing regulations for waiver or reduction of fees, as well as the requirements of fee waiver under the FOIA statute – that “disclosure of the information is in the public interest because it is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of the operations or activities of the government and is not primarily in the commercial interest of the requester.” 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii), *see also* 40 C.F.R. § 2.107(l).

1. The subject matter of the requested records specifically concerns identifiable “operations and activities of the government.”

The requested records relate to the interactions between recently appointed EPA communications staff and the media, and the discussions between these employees and Administrator Pruitt regarding his public communications and other information EPA provides to the public. These activities are unquestionably “identifiable operations or activities of the government.”

2. The disclosure of the requested documents would be meaningfully informative and “likely to contribute to an understanding of Federal government operations or activities.”

The activities of EPA’s new intergovernmental relations staff are likely to shed light on a variety of issues of crucial public interest. Sierra Club members and the public at large are gravely concerned about the EPA’s anti-regulatory agenda, and close ties to polluting industries and their advocates in Congress and state governments.

Once the requested documents are made available, Sierra Club will analyze them and present its findings to its members and online activists and the general public in a manner that will meaningfully enhance the public’s understanding of EPA’s activities. The requested records are not otherwise in the public domain and are not accessible other than through a FOIA request. The documents requested will thus be “meaningfully informative” and “likely to contribute” to an understanding of EPA’s operations.

3. The disclosure would contribute to the understanding of the public at large, as opposed to the individual understanding of the requester or a narrow segment of interested persons.

Sierra Club has longstanding experience and expertise on issues related to government accountability and transparency, the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, climate policy, the protection of the natural environment, and the development and use of energy resources.

Sierra Club disseminates the information it receives through FOIA requests in a variety of ways, such as: analysis and distribution to the media, distribution through publication and mailing, posting on its website, emailing and list serve distribution to our members across the U.S., and via public meetings and events. Every year the Sierra Club website receives 26,298,200 unique visits and over 30 million page views; on average, the site gets 72,049 visits per day. Sierra Magazine is a bi-monthly magazine with a printed circulation of approximately 650,000 copies. Sierra Club Insider, an electronic newsletter, is sent to nearly 3 million people twice a month. In addition, Sierra Club disseminates information obtained by FOIA requests through comments to administrative agencies, and where necessary, through the judicial system. In the past, Sierra Club has published, posted, and disseminated numerous stories on coal and coal power plants regarding their impacts on health, the environment and alternative energy. This includes information on Sierra Club's web pages, such as our Beyond Coal Campaign portal, our Clean Energies Solutions portal and our press releases.⁵

Sierra Club intends to share the information received from this FOIA request with our impacted members across the country, the media and our allies who share a common interest in the operations of the EPA under the new Administrator.

Sierra Club unquestionably has the "specialized knowledge" and "ability and intention" to disseminate the information requested in the broad manner outlined above, and to do so in a manner that contributes to the understanding of the "public-at-large."

4. The disclosure would contribute "significantly" to public understanding of government operations or activities.

Sierra Club members and the public at large are gravely concerned about the EPA's anti-regulatory agenda, close ties to polluting industries, and coordination with champions of those industries in Congress and state governments. The activities of EPA's senior intergovernmental relations staff, including their coordination with outside groups and individuals, are likely to

⁵ For example, Sierra Club sought information about coal export and permitting activities in Oregon via a state public records act request at the Port of Coos Bay. All correspondence is published online and has received extensive media attention from press releases on the subject. See Sierra Club Challenges Dirty and Dangerous Fossil Fuel Exports in Oregon, <http://content.sierraclub.org/environmentallaw/lawsuit/2013/sierra-club-challenges-dirty-and-dangerous-fossil-fuel-exports-oregon>. Sierra Club also recently publicized the results of its FOIA requests regarding agency job freezes, a story that was picked up by the Washington Post. Alexander Rony, *Trump Admin Policy Leaves 700 CDC Jobs Vacant*, The Planet, <http://www.sierraclub.org/planet/2017/05/trump-admin-policies-leave-700-cdc-jobs-vacant>; Lena H. Sun, *Nearly 700 vacancies at CDC because of Trump administration's hiring freeze*, The Washington Post, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/to-your-health/wp/2017/05/19/nearly-700-vacancies-at-cdc-because-of-trump-administration-hiring-freeze/?utm_term=.6c2e70d8581e.

shed light on how EPA may be using staff time to advance the interests of polluters instead of its mission to protect public health and the environment. Disclosure of the records requested above will significantly enhance the public's understanding of these activities.

5. The requester has no commercial interest that would be furthered by the requested disclosure.⁶

Sierra Club has no commercial interest in the requested records. Nor does it have any intention to use these records in any manner that "furthers a commercial, trade, or profit interest" as those terms are commonly understood. Sierra Club is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization under sections 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) of the Internal Revenue Code, and as such has no commercial interest. The requested records will be used for the furtherance of Sierra Club's mission to inform the public on matters of vital importance to the environment and public health.

Sierra Club respectfully requests that EPA waive processing and copying fees pursuant to 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A) because the public will be the primary beneficiary of this requested information. In the event that your agency denies a fee waiver, please send a written explanation for the denial. Please do not incur expenses beyond \$250 without first contacting our office for explicit authorization.

Thank you for your cooperation. If you find that this request is unclear in any way please do not hesitate to call me to see if I can clarify the request or otherwise expedite and simplify your efforts to comply.

/s/ Elena Saxonhouse

Elena Saxonhouse

Senior Attorney

Sierra Club - Environmental Law Program

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⁶ Because Sierra Club has no commercial interest, it is not necessary to consider the final factor for a fee waiver, which compares the magnitude of an identified commercial interest to the public interest in disclosure.